# Fighting the Soviet Imperialists: The Contras in Nicaragua

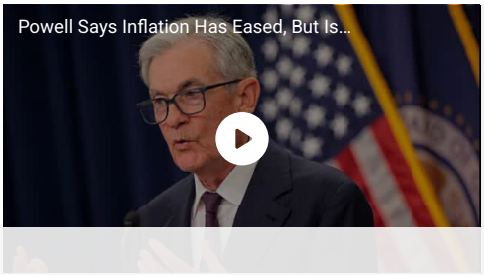
An inside look at Nicaragua's anti-Marxist rebels-who they are and why they are fighting.

**JACK WHEELER** | FROM THE JUNE/JULY 1984 ISSUE

Ordinarily, I like being in jungles. I've spent time in many of them, from the Amazon in Ecuador to the Sepik in New Guinea, the Ituri in Africa, and the Montagnard Highlands of South Vietnam. But this time, it was different.

It was the summer of 1983, and I was clandestinely crossing the border from Honduras into Nicaragua with a patrol of 90 FDN (Nicaraguan Democratic Force) guerrillas. The FDN is one of several rebel groups—collectively known as the "Contras"—who are trying to overthrow the Marxist Sandinista government of Nicaragua, which is backed by Cuba and the Soviet Union. My month-long sojourn with the Contras marked the beginning of a multi-continent investigation of Third World anti-Soviet guerrilla movements that took me from Central America to Afghanistan and Africa.

Advertisement




AD

My special high-tech boots of which I was so proud were no match for the mud of the Central American rain forest, nor for the Contras' mode of travel: straight up the side of one forested mountain, straight down the other, avoiding anything remotely resembling a trail or path, over and over and over—and over—again. It had started to rain, but my clothes were so thoroughly drenched with sweat that it made no difference. I had forgotten what it was like not to be thirsty. Even though I kept filling my water bottle at every opportunity and lacing it with a powdered electrolyte replacement, I was far more dehydrated than I had ever been in, say, Timbuktu in the Sahara Desert.

For guerrillas, the Contras I was with were well equipped: Belgian FAL automatic rifles; "Thumper" grenade launchers; LAW rockets (made famous by Clint Eastwood's "Dirty Harry" Callaghan in the movie *The Enforcer)*', a few Soviet RPG-7 grenade launchers, AK-47 Kalashnikov rifles, and AK-47 ammunition in boxes with Arabic lettering (captured PLO stuff very likely provided by the Israelis, though the Israeli government denies this); flashlights, walkie-talkies, good fighting knives, web harness gear, canteens, new blue-green uniforms, and US Army ankle-length jungle boots with deep-lugged soles—all the latter from the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

During a rest break, I tried on a couple of spare pairs of these jungle boots the fellows had with them, but they were too small. Finally, a large, fair-skinned Contra whose code name was "Yankee" took off his own and insisted that I try them on. They fit. Somehow, Yankee squeezed into another pair, and off we went again. Now I wouldn't be holding everyone up by continually swan-diving into the slippery mud. I was even able to catch up

with Charley.

Charley was point man for the patrol. I'll never forget my first sight of him as he emerged from the jungle, built like a black Baryshnikov, sporting a Belgian FAL rifle and a Soviet RPG -7. If all the Contras are like this, I thought, the Sandinistas are in real trouble.

Charley Fitzeral is 22, a Creole (black) whose family moved from Bluefields, in eastern Nicaragua, to the capital, Managua, when Charley was a young boy. Charley's grandfather was a black American businessman who met a lady from Corn Island, off Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, while on vacation. They ended up settling down in Bluefields.

Charley's father is a diesel mechanic who made the mistake of telling his neighbors and friends that he thought the Sandinistas didn't really believe in democracy and their promise for elections was a lie. For this, Charley told me, his father was accused of being a reactionary counterrevolutionary, arrested three times, beat up very severely, and had his fingernails ripped off in a prison torture cell. His father's brother, Charley's uncle, was also arrested and disappeared. So in December 1981, Charley decided to join the FDN.

At the time, Charley was majoring in engineering at UNAN (National Autonomous University of Nicaragua), in Managua. But Charley was a little more than just another college student—in 1976, he was a member of the Nicaraguan Olympic Team in the Montreal Olympic Games. Charley dreams of the day when the war will be over, when he can return to athletics and continue his education in engineering and telecommunications. But in the meantime, one of Nicaragua's most famous athletes is fighting with the Contras.

Charley and I became friends almost immediately. I told him he looked much like the great rock star Chuck Berry, and he flashed a brilliant white smile. We talked of his being in the Olympics and why he was with the anti-Sandinista guerrillas. "I was so proud to represent my country in the Olympic Games, and in many other international competitions as well," he said to me, with tears welling up in his eyes. "I want so much to be proud of my country. So I must fight to put an end to this nightmare the *piricuacos* [what the Contras call the Sandinistas: Spanish for "rabid dogs"] are making my people suffer, fight for a free and democratic Nicaragua."

When he was dictator of Nicaragua from 1963 until the Sandinista takeover in 1979, Anastasio Somoza Debayle defended his regime by accusing anyone who opposed him of being a communist. Nicaragua's current rulers have adapted this technique, denouncing all those who object to their rule as "Somocistas"—reactionary counterrevolutionaries who want to drag Nicaragua back to the evil days of Somoza. Thus the nickname *Contras* for the FDN guerrillas: from "contra-revolucionarios," Spanish for *counterrevolutionaries.* As I came to know Charley and dozens of his fellow compatriots, I discovered how the Sandinistas' accusation is as absurd as was Somoza's.

Nicaragua lies athwart Central America, between Honduras on the north and Costa Rica on the south, the Pacific Ocean at its west coast, the Caribbean on the east. At a little over 50,000 square miles—about the size of Alabama or Greece—it is Central America's largest country. But, possessing a population of only some 2.5 million, it is also the region's most sparsely populated country (with a population density about that of Iowa's)—and, as tens of thousands of refugees have fled the country, today it is even more so. A little more than two-thirds of Nicaragua's citizens are mestizos—of mixed Spanish and native Indian lineage. About a fifth of the country's people are white; another tenth are black; and the remaining 5 percent are indigenous Indians.

During the first 20 years of Nicaragua's independence from Spain in 1821, a parade of 18 presidents followed each other in coup and countercoup. Its Spanish political heritage militated against the adoption of North American democratic ideals. Instead, coup d'état, intrigue, and revolution have been the norm, one *caudillo* strongman replacing another, all within the context of a continuous Mafia-style clan warfare between the Liberal party, based in the city of Granada, and the Conservative party, centered in Leon. Managua, the capital, is neutrally located between the two.

Like street gangs in the Bronx, the struggle between the two parties had more to do with the control of "turf" and political spoils than with ideals or ideology. Neither the Indians in the jungles of the north, such as the Miskitos, nor the Creole blacks of the east coast ever were considered in the rivalry or the country's development. Nicaragua's history, in the words of one observer, can be summarized as "an elitist competition between urban-based factions of mestizo [Spanish-Indian blood] clans."

Possibly the worst of the *caudillos* of either party to rule Nicaragua was the Liberal dictator José Santa Zelaya, who came to power in 1893. In 1909, a revolution against him started up in Bluefields, to which a contingent of US Marines was dispatched, ostensibly to protect the small American community living there. The Zelaya regime collapsed, and the US government responded to the ensuing political chaos, anarchy, and violence by maintaining an American military presence (primarily a Legation Guard of 100 Marines) on and off until 1933.

Historian J. Tierney has written of US policy toward Nicaragua during this period:

> U.S. officials grew firm in their belief that only a true democracy, with free elections, could produce a permanent political stability. This produced an inherent political contradiction in U.S. policy. Thus, the U.S. began demanding both stability and democracy in Nicaragua, political goals which had been mutually exclusive throughout the country's history. Eventually, one would have to go.

(Journalist Walter Lippmann, however, saw the situation in different terms. To Lippman, America's involvement in Nicaragua was nothing but dollar diplomacy, with Nicaragua an "American protectorate." As Ronald Steel reports in his book *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, Lippmann wrote, in response to President Coolidge's dispatch of Marines to Nicaragua in 1927, that the Central American nation was "not an independent republic, that its government is the creature of the State Department, that management of its finances and the direction of its domestic and foreign affairs are determined not in Nicaragua but in Wall Street.")

When a civil war (again, a result of Liberal-Conservative rivalry) precipitated the American military intervention in 1927, the 31-year-old son of a plantation owner from Nicaragua's Masaya province who had been radicalized in Mexico by syndicalist and communist organizations—and who had already started to fight the US-supported government of Adolfo Diaz—decided his purpose in life was to raise a guerrilla army and fight the Americanos. His name was Augusto Cesar Sandino, and one of his battle cries was *Mueran los Yanquis*: "Death to the Yankees."

Using Honduras as a sanctuary, as the Contras do today, Sandino waged a classic guerrilla war in Nicaragua's northern jungles—as well as a shrewd public-relations campaign throughout the West and Latin America. Sandino sought to have himself portrayed as a romantic Robin Hood–style folk hero, a benevolent and impassioned patriot struggling to rid his beloved country of the tyranny of corrupt autocrats and Yankee imperialism.

Much of the American media bought this portrayal of Sandino. And by 1928, spurred by reports from the press, all manner of academic, church, and other groups started springing up across the United States to protest the presence of US Marines in Nicaragua.

In contrast to his respected image abroad, Sandino's behavior at home was another story. Against those of his fellow citizens who had the temerity to oppose him, Sandino practiced a particularly grisly terrorism. Most of Sandino's letters and circulars containing his orders for action and punishment decrees ended with the dreaded phrase *Que sea pasado por las armas*: "Execute him."

Death by machete was the official form of Sandinista execution. Sandino's favorites were the *corte de cumbo*, in which the victim's head is split in half by the machete slicing straight down on top of his skull to the base of his brain, and the *corte de chaleco* (the "waist-coat cut")—two slashes cut the victim's arms off and a third disembowels him. "Freedom is not won with flowers," Sandino was fond of saying; "that is why we have had to resort to the *cortes*."

By the early '30s, American public sentiment against US military involvement in Nicaragua was high. Under the direction of President Hoover—who was generally skittish about US military intervention abroad—the Marines began pulling out of Nicaragua while simultaneously training a National Guard (*Guardia National*) to fight the original Sandinistas. Elections were held in Nicaragua in 1928 and 1932 (although violently opposed by Sandino, who protested the US Marines' supervision of the vote), and the elected president, Juan Sacasa, appointed Anastasio Somoza Garcia as *jefe director* of the *Guardia*.

With the Marines gone by 1933, President Sacasa invited both Somoza and Sandino to a peace conference in Managua. On the evening of the scheduled conference, February 21, 1934, while being driven from the presidential palace to downtown Managua, Sandino's car was stopped at a *Guardia* roadblock. Sandino and two companions were pulled from the car and shot. By 1936, Somoza had control of the government—the Somoza Dynasty had begun.

Although Nicaragua prospered fairly well under the rule of Anastasio I (assassinated by a young Nicaraguan poet in 1956) and his sons Luis (retired from the presidency in 1963) and Anastasio Debayle, the Somozas ruled in the grand *caudillo* style, amassing enormous personal wealth. With a public stance of running one of the most anti-Communist governments in the world, Anastasio II attracted millions in US military aid—and the hatred of Fidel Castro.

In Cuba in 1961, Castro began sponsoring with money, indoctrination, and military training a group of Nicaraguan insurgents led by Carlos Fonseca and Tomas Borge. Claiming Augusto Sandino as their inspiration, they called themselves the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Starting in 1963 from a base near Matagalpa in north-central Nicaragua, the FSLN tried for over a decade without much success to foment a peasant rebellion by raiding mining camps and outpost towns. In 1976, Carlos Fonseca was killed in action by Somoza's *Guardia*, and the Marxist insurgency seemed finished.

But by 1977, a torrent of international criticism was raining down upon Anastasio II. Newspaper columnist Jack Anderson called him "the world's greediest ruler." Amnesty International condemned the "human rights" abuses of his *Guardia*. Nicaragua's middle class had become increasingly resentful of the regime's corruption: Managua's police force, for example, was surely one of the world's only that drove new Mercedes Benzes—Somoza, of course, owned the Mercedes dealership. The Roman Catholic Church grew more stridently opposed to the autocratic methods of the *Guardia*. In the United States, the Carter administration targeted Nicaragua as one example of its human-rights policy by cutting off military aid and assistance.

In July 1977, Somoza had a heart attack; both his health and his personal life deteriorated. And when long-time opponent of the Somozas and editor of *La Prensa* newspaper Pedro Chamorro was killed by an unknown gunman in early 1978, the torrent of international criticism turned into a flood.

Hundreds of tons of Soviet-supplied military equipment were smuggled to the FSLN from Mexico, Venezuela, Panama, Costa Rica, and Cuba. Hundreds of PLO guerrillas, Cubans, and East Germans joined the FSLN using Costa Rica as a sanctuary. Business leaders, labor unions, and antigovernment political parties formed a non-Marxist "Broad Opposition Front."

As a full-scale civil war broke out by the end of 1978, the Carter administration got the International Monetary Fund to block emergency funds for Nicaragua and pressured countries such as Israel and Belgium into stopping military aid, while the United States did the same. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance wrote to Somoza, demanding that he leave the country, after which the US government would recognize a transitional government of the FSLN and the Broad Opposition Front, prior to elections. Somoza flew to Miami on July 17, 1979 (he was assassinated by Sandinista agents in Asunción, Paraguay, in September 1980), and the FSLN marched victoriously into Managua two days later. Tomas Borge, one of the original FSLN founders, became chief of the police.

While publicly promising elections and genuine democracy, the Sandinistas quickly erected what approaches a totalitarian police state. Within little more than a month of taking power, FSLN leaders were in Moscow signing an official accord with the Soviet Communist Party. The Nicaraguan people celebrated deliriously when Somoza was overthrown. The phrase *Habia llegado un nuevo amanecer*—"the days of happiness have arrived"—was on everyone's lips. But the tears of joy turned to tears of suffering all too quickly, and for many they were perhaps worse than anything the Nicaraguan people had ever shed under Somoza.

The government was now led by a five-member junta and a nine-member directorate, both headed by Sandinista Commander Daniel Ortega. By 1980, Violetta Chamorro, widow of the *La Prensa* editor who had been calling for democracy and a mixed economy for Nicaragua, resigned from the junta to help form the rebel group FDN. At the same time, Alfonso Robelo, a prominent businessman who had formed the Nicaraguan Democratic Movement (MDN) to oppose Somoza, also resigned from the junta to later help form ARDE, the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance, an anti-Sandinista resistance movement based in Costa Rica. Arturo Cruz, head of the Central Bank of Nicaragua, joined the junta to replace Violetta and Robelo; but in 1981, as Nicaragua's ambassador to the United States, he defected to the United States, where he now lives.

In 1981, the Sandinistas' ambassador to the United Nations, Jaime Pasquier, resigned and sought asylum in the United States. "What exists in Nicaragua," he reported, "is a complete dictatorship." In August 1981, Sandinista defense minister Humberto Ortega (brother of Daniel) in a public speech, declared:

> Without Sandinism we cannot be Marxist-Leninist, and Sandinism without Marxism-Leninism cannot be revolutionary. That is why they are indissolubly united, and that is why our doctrine is Marxism-Leninism.

By the fall of 1981, Eden Pastora, the famous Sandinista guerrilla hero known as Commander Zero and vice minister of defense and chief of the militia, resigned and left the country, later to join Robelo and head the military arm of ARDE.

In the first two years of Sandinista rule, former junta member Arturo Cruz has reported in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, more than 200,000 Nicaraguans fled the country as refugees, including some 20,000 of the country's 170,000 Miskito Indians. In March 1982, *Time* magazine reported that 42 Miskito villages along the Rio Coco had been fire-bombed, 49 churches destroyed, 35 villagers from Leimus were buried alive by Sandinista soldiers, and thousands of Indians were imprisoned or had disappeared at the hands of security forces—all for resisting the restructuring of their society on Sandinista-Marxist lines.

The human-rights monitoring organization Americas Watch has pointed to the government's treatment of the Miskitos as the "most unfortunate decline in human rights in Nicaragua [since the Sandinista takeover in 1979], and that which may prove the most enduring.'' The organization has detailed the Sandinistas' systematic abuse of the Miskitos, citing in particular the government's forcible relocation and confinement of the Indians in guarded settlement camps. The Sandinistas have extensively confiscated Miskito land, without offering the Indians compensation, the organization has charged. Moreover, Americas Watch has "received credible accounts" of harsh physical abuse of many of the hundreds of Miskitos detained in state prisons on charges of counterrevolutionary activities.

On March 15, 1982, the Sandinistas declared a "state of emergency" and suspended several rights, including *habeas corpus.* The *Wall Street Journal* commented:

> Nicaragua, like Poland, has finally made it official: It has declared itself a police state.…There is, of course, no surprise in any of this. It follows the classic pattern of Marxist revolutionaries everywhere. First destabilize the society, then masquerade as social democrats while seizing power with armed force, then declare that emergency conditions make it necessary to 'mobilize' society, i.e., impose totalitarian conditions. The script was written in 1917, it worked well in Eastern Europe and Cuba, and now we are seeing it in Central America.

Indeed, Adolfo Calero, one of the founders of the anti-Somoza Broad Opposition Front, imprisoned by Somoza in 1977, and now the leader of the FDN, said to me in a personal interview, "The Sandinistas make Somoza look like a saint."

Today, in 1984, the rebel-embattled Nicaraguan government has the largest ground force in Central America, dwarfing its neighbors in military might. The country is, in effect, a fortified base for the Soviet Union. According to a State Department source, from 1979 to 1983 Soviet-bloc nations provided the Sandinistas with $250 million worth of weapons. In Somoza's day, there were 11 military bases in the country; now there are close to 50. At its height, Somoza's feared *Guardia* numbered 11,000; today, the Sandinista army has 60,000 full-time soldiers and another 60,000 men in the militia and reserves. If the United States had a per capita mobilization equal to Nicaragua's, it would have 13 million men under arms (six times what it now has)—and it is the Sandinistas' announced intention to more than double their present mobilization, to 250,000 armed soldiers.

Military advisors from the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, North Korea, and over 2,000 from Cuba guide the operations of the Sandinista armed forces, the Cubans right in the field fighting against the guerrillas. The East Germans have instructed the Sandinistas in organizing a massive and ruthlessly efficient internal security apparatus. The Sandinista Defense Committee (known by its Spanish initials CDS) operates over 10,000 "block committees," which monitor, Big Brother–style, citizens' activities, encourage neighbor to spy on neighbor, unleash mobs to intimidate opponents, and are in charge of distributing many services, including food-ration cards. If you don't exhibit sufficient "revolutionary fervor" to satisfy your local block committee, you may not have very much to eat.

During my travels through Central America last year, I met many of the leaders of the various anti-Sandinista guerrilla insurgencies operating out of Honduras and Costa Rica. In spending time with Steadman Fagoth of Misura (Miskitos-Sumos-Ramas, the principal Indian tribes in northeast Nicaragua); Brooklyn Rivera of Misura-sata (a splinter Miskito-Creole group); Carlitos Henry and other Creole leaders; Alfonso Robelo of ARDE; and members of the seven-member FDN directorate, such as Adolfo Calero, Enrique Bermudez, Edgar Chamorro, and Indalaceo Rodriguez; as well as among many Nicaraguan refugees and *campesino*-Contras, I came to understand better why they are fighting the Sandinistas. The more I heard, the more Nicaragua sounded like a replay of the crazed, envy-and hate-filled fanaticism of China's Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.

What can you say to a Nicaraguan woman, for example, who tells you how her father, mother, and sister were shot through the head and killed resisting the confiscation of their property by the Sandinista government, who walked four days over the mountains and jungles from Managua to Honduras with her five children, who is now a penniless refugee while her husband has joined the Contras—yet who still has a smile for you and reassures you that someday her country will be free? To a laughing teen-age boy whose lower right leg is a shattered mess, who says he can't wait for his leg to heal so he can return and fight the Sandinistas again? Or to a Creole grandfather who escaped to Costa Rica, alone in a tiny rowboat through the open sea, after Sandinista interrogators pulled his fingernails out, and who tells you: "The people of Bluefields are really suffering and begging for someone to help them. The freedom we had in Bluefields we have no more. We could go to church whenever we wanted, and after church we could easily take a walk and go back home, or go to a movie or a party. Now, it's not like that. Everything has changed completely."

But perhaps Nicaragua's most heartbreaking tragedy is that of the Miskito Indians. As Wycliffe Diego and Tillet Mullins of the Council of Elders, the Miskitos' tribal leadership, and Miskito guerrilla leader Steadman Fagoth explained to me: "Since the Sandinistas promised in the early '70s to support our goals of regaining land taken by Somoza's family, preserving our languages and culture, and participating fully in the economic and political life of Nicaragua, we helped and fought with them. But within the first week of their power, they began confiscating our land and controlling the production of coffee, beans, rice, everything.

"Then came the teachers, who demanded all villagers, adults and children, attend their Marxist-Leninist indoctrination sessions, and state security people, who told our ministers what they could and could not say in their sermons in church. The traditional Indian way of life is naturally opposed to Marxist ideology, and when the communities refused to obey, Sandinista troops came and massacred them. Four thousand separate houses were burned down in the Rio Coco area. People saw all their animals—horses, cows, pigs, chickens, dogs—machine-gunned to death, their coconut and fruit trees set on fire, and had to flee with just the clothes on their backs.

"This started in early 1981. In February of '82, the church at Tulumbila village was burned down with many people inside. Just now [July 1983], all the Creole and Miskito villages of the Pearl Lagoon, Set Net, Tasbapauni, Kukra Hill—all of them—have been completely destroyed by 5,000 Sandinista soldiers. Twenty-five thousand of our people are refugees now in Honduras, 12,000 are in Sandinista concentration camps, and 10,000 are missing—most of them killed, we think, by the Sandinistas. So we have no choice but to fight, using Sandinista guerrilla methods against them."

Fagoth has about 3,000 Indian guerrillas under his command, operating in small patrols, harassing government garrisons, ambushing government convoys, and trying to protect Indian villages from reprisals. While he and his men lack sufficient weaponry and training to take significant amounts of territory, they have scored several successes, such as blowing up the fuel-storage facilities and wharves at Puerto Cabezas and Puerto Isabel on the Caribbean coast.

While Fagoth operates his Misura rebels out of Honduras, Brooklyn Rivera has set up his Misurasata group in Costa Rica, after a falling out with Steadman and the Miskitos' Council of Elders. Under Rivera, Misurasata has about 1,000 men (mostly Creoles, as the Miskitos and Sumos live far to the north—although his most famous commander, Treces Bojazos ["13 Blows"], is Miskito). These guerrillas stage raids, sabotage, and harassment operations in the Monkey Point–Punta Gorda area in southeast Nicaragua, and are expanding toward Bluefields.

One of Rivera's problems is that his men are only nominally under his command. It is the famous Sandinista hero Edén Pastora—Commander Zero—who gives the military orders, for Misurasata is part of ARDE, of which Pastora is the military director. Carlitos Henry's SICC (the Southern Indigenous Creole Community) is similarly aligned—but many Creoles don't trust Pastora. Pastora was still with the Sandinista junta when the massacres along the Rio Coco and Caribbean coast began in early 1981. He refuses to fly the traditional blue-and-white flag of Nicaragua but flies the red-and-black Sandinista flag instead. He still calls himself a Sandinista—he has turned against the Sandinista regime, he says, because it has sold out the revolution to the Soviets and Cubans—and won't tolerate the term *piricuaco* in his presence. For these and other similar reasons, a great many Creoles and others in ARDE are afraid that Pastora's split with the FSLN leadership was personal and that he merely wants to replace the Sandinistas' nine-man directorate with that of one man: himself. They are afraid that for all Pastora's refusal to cooperate with the FDN because they are "Somocistas," if anyone has the capacity to be a Nicaraguan *caudillo*—another Somoza—it is Edén Pastora.

In addition to Rivera's 1,000 Misurasata guerrillas, Pastora has about 3,000 men under his FRS (Sandinista Revolutionary Front) command (many of whom, however, are so as members of Robelo's Nicaraguan Democratic Movement [MDN]). While Pastora has been able to effectively stifle traffic along the Rio San Juan, he has been unable to expand his area of control much beyond the uninhabited territory between the San Juan and the Rio Indio, in the southeast near the Costa Rican border. (By mid-April, Pastora's guerrillas had captured the Caribbean coastal town of San Juan del Norte, a few miles within the Nicaragua-Costa Rica border. But a Sandinista assault forced the rebels to withdraw from the town just days after they had taken it, and Pastora's announced plans for setting up a provisional government in southeast Nicaragua were, at least for the moment, foiled.) Although Pastora's men operate as far north as Rama, west into Rivas province, and have recently mined the port of El Bluff at Bluefields, large portions of the Sandinista army and militia have not deserted to his cause as he expected.

A principal cause of Pastora's lack of expected effectiveness is his obdurate refusal to join forces with Adolfo Calero's FDN. This is an endless source of frustration for the political leader of ARDE, Alfonso Robelo, who is revered by all those under him and whom I found to be possibly the single most impressive individual in all the anti-Sandinista resistance organizations. Pastora's denunciations of the FDN as a "three-layer cake" (the seven-member FDN directorate, many with unquestioned anti-Somoza credentials, on top; *campesino*-peasant guerrillas on the bottom; and *ex-Guardia* officers as the military command in the middle) are hollow now that the directorate has removed the offensive officers from the command staff. Today, Pastora's objections focus on directorate member—and former *Guardia* colonel—Enrique Bermudez (whom Somoza exiled to Washington, D.C., during the entire civil war for attempting to organize a reform movement within the *Guardia).*

ARDE political leader Alfonso Robelo realizes that "only through a united effort of both the FDN and ARDE is there any chance of ridding Nicaragua of the Sandinistas. Our country has now become a Soviet-Cuban colony. It is our duty to overcome past enmities in order to bring peace and freedom to Nicaragua." Pastora would not be the overall military leader of such a unified effort, as the FDN is three times the size of ARDE. It is likely this knowledge that blinds Pastora to Robelo's insight.

The Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), which receives aid from the CIA, is far and away the largest and strongest of the anti-Sandinista groups, numbering around 12,000 men and women, some 8,000 of whom are now fighting inside Nicaragua. They are mostly *campesinos*—peasant farmers—and in one day, I saw over a hundred walking over the border into Honduras, asking to join the FDN. I talked with dozens and dozens of these Contras, getting to know in particular several of them in the patrol I accompanied inside Nicaragua. While each of them has his, or her, individual story, their stories, reasons, and goals had much in common.

• Julio Lopez Florian is 19 years old, from Ocotal, in northwest Nicaragua's Nueva Segovia province. He and his wife Xiomara have a 2½-year-old son. Julio joined the Sandinistas to fight against Somoza in 1976, when he was 12 years old. His brother had cooperated with the Sandinistas and was subsequently caught and tortured by the *Guardia.* The Sandinistas sent Julio to a training camp in Honduras called Colorado, and he returned under the command of Francisco Rivera, a famous Sandinista *commandante* known as "The Fox."

Julio took part in several battles, such as one at Apaji, near the Honduran border in northwest Nicaragua, in 1979, where he and 100 fellow Sandinistas fought off a large *Guardia* force. But by December 1982, Julio began cooperating with the FDN. In those three and a half years since the Sandinistas had seized power in July 1979, Julio saw "the *piricuacos* increasingly lie to the people of Nicaragua. They promised to have elections and democracy. We have not got either." (The Sandinista government has scheduled national elections for November of this year, but many observers are doubtful that anti-Sandinista groups will be able to participate in any meaningful way.)

Instead, Jesus Oliva, a friend of Julio's who worked at the radio station in Ocotal, had his ribs broken by the Sandinistas for objecting to certain government programs. In March 1983, Father Ephraim Salcedo was saying mass in the church at Ciudad Antigua, when a group of Sandinista soldiers marched in, called his sermon *mierda* ("shit"), and physically ripped off his vestments. Julio began secretly distributing Contra literature and passing on information after a fellow Sandinista soldier bragged to him over a beer about an incident in Masatape on May 8, 1983—this soldier and his comrades shot seven women who refused to let their sons be drafted into the militia.

Then Julio's brother Bartholomew—the one who had been tortured by Somoza's men for working with the Sandinistas—got into a public argument with a Sandinista officer. When Bartholomew criticized Marxism as antidemocratic and accused the Sandinista rulers of not living up to their promises, the officer called him an antisocial reactionary, pulled out a revolver, and shot him dead in broad daylight on the main street of Ocotal. Julio fled to Honduras to join and fight with the Contras.

• Armando Cintaeno Acevado is 48 years old. He and his wife Miriam have seven children. As an agricultural wholesale merchant, Armando traded cattle, rice, corn, and beans in Nueva Segovia province. As an opposition candidate to Somoza's candidate, he was elected mayor of Ciudad Antigua in 1978 and when the FSLN toppled Somoza, Armando worked with Jaime Wheelock, a member of the ruling nine-man directorate, to form the Sandinista Health Committee in Nueva Segovia.

"We all thought we were working together for a better, freer Nicaragua after Somoza," Armando told me. "But then, upon orders from Jaime Agurcia, the Sandinista *commandante* for Nueva Segovia province, Sandinista soldiers began slitting people's throats and shooting them in the streets of Ciudad Antigua for being 'reactionary' and opposing Sandinista 'reforms.'"

After being jailed five times in one year for "lack of cooperation" with political organizing, Armando started giving information to the newly formed 15th of September Legion, which later evolved into the FDN. By now, 1981, the local Sandinista block committees were spying on everyone, and repression was in full swing. On February 3, 1983, Armando was released from jail—his sixth incarceration, this time for 40 days. So many people he knew had been arrested, never to be seen again, that he was certain his disappearance was only a matter of time. So he disappeared across the border to join the Contras.

At 48, Armando has fought in four pitched battles against the Sandinista army and ran me into the ground when I tried to keep up with him. "Every jail in Nicaragua is full," he told me, "as everyone is suspected of being counterrevolutionary."

• Susana Benavides Herrera is 24, from Telpaneca in Madriz province in northwest Nicaragua. She has three children but is separated from her husband. Her father is a *campesino*, a small farmer who owns a 12-acre plot of land on which he raises corn, beans, and a few cattle. Susana was denounced as a counterrevolutionary by the local block committee when she refused to attend weekly compulsory propaganda meetings. When she in turn called the block members atheists, her food coupons were revoked and her children threatened.

"It was easy to start collaborating with the FDN," she told me, "because there are so many members in my area. Finally, the threats against my children got so bad, I had to take them to my mother's and come here." "Here" was a particular Contra base inside Nicaragua, where I met her. She handles radio communications for the base and keeps the inventories of weapons, ammunition, and supplies. "All the men here have treated me well and with respect," she informed me. "We are all fighting together for what we believe in—for a Nicaragua free of political indoctrination, for a democracy and a free economy. We would rather die than let our children grow up in a Marxist, atheist Nicaragua."

• Frank Tourniel Amador is 27, from Leon in Chinandega province. He and his wife Maria have three children. Frank was condemned as a counterrevolutionary for objecting to food rationing, civilian repression, and state agricultural policies. "Just like most of us fighting in the FDN, I am a *campesino*," Frank confided.

"I would like to live in peace and be left alone to farm my small piece of land. But the *piricuacos* now tell you what you can and cannot grow on your own land. As bad as he was, Somoza never did that. Before, you could sell what you grew to whomever you wanted and buy your supplies from whomever you wanted. Now, you must sell your *maize* [corn] or *frijoles* [beans] or whatever to the State Agricultural Cooperative—at a very low price—and you can only buy sugar, salt, flour, and other things you need from the state as well—and at a very high price! The *campesinos* were hoping things would be better after Somoza. Instead, they are much worse."

• Omar Aguilar Garcia is 20, from Diriamba, in Carazo province, south of Managua, and is not married. He and his family had a small coffee plantation, which was confiscated by the Institute for National Agrarian Reform set up by the Sandinista government. The family's house and both of their trucks were also confiscated, and when Omar's brothers resisted, they were arrested and shot without any trial.

"The first year of the Sandinistas was worse than 40 years of Somoza," according to Omar. "I and my family thought the Sandinistas would bring democracy at last to Nicaragua. That is why my family cooperated with them in their fight to overthrow Somoza, gave them food and information. But after they took power, once we started asking when were the elections, we suddenly were 'bourgeois exploiters' who unjustly owned too much land. There is no more freedom left in Nicaragua. There is nothing to do but fight."

• Camilo Guzman is 22, from a village near Managua, the capital of Nicaragua. Before joining the Contras in January 1983, he was a student at one of the largest secondary schools in the country, the Experimental Institute in Managua. In the fall of 1982, the students began protesting the constant Marxist political indoctrination injected into every one of their subjects. "There are over 2,000 students at my school," Camilo told me, "and at least

half joined a group of us objecting to our being given propaganda in place of education. What we all especially hated was the Cuban teachers, who couldn't teach anything except Marxist rhetoric. Anyway, the *piricuacos* broke up our meetings, beat many of us up very badly, and killed two of our leaders. I learned through a friend that I would be next, so I contacted the FDN, and they arranged for my escape."

• Antonio is a small, young boy not much bigger than the AK-47 Kalashnikov machine-gun he carries. His code name is "Canela" (Cinnamon), and he is 13 years old, from the town of Mozonte in Nueva Segovia in the northwest. In May 1983, his mother had complained about food shortages, that the Sandinistas were ruining the economy. In response, Sandinista soldiers broke into their house. One soldier shot Antonio's baby brother in the shoulder with an AK-47, while another stepped on the baby's right hand, breaking it. They threatened to kill Antonio's mother and her entire family if she made any more "reactionary" complaints. Antonio's father, a *campesino*, went into hiding, while Antonio, his mother, and his baby brother fled to Honduras.

A week before I met him, Antonio had walked back into Nicaragua and brought his father out. A 13-year-old boy had saved his father's life, and there was a depth to his pride that words could not describe. Now son and father were fighting in the FDN together.

Far from being reactionary "Somocistas," the Contras seemed to me to represent a genuine peasant rebellion against a totalitarian regime. But I must admit to acquiring a growing affection for the young men and women I met who are risking their lives—voluntarily and without pay—to struggle against the Sandinistas.

It takes a lot of time, money, and professional training to develop an effective guerrilla operation. The FDN is operating with small quantities of all three, even with an estimated annual aid of $21 million from the CIA since late 1981 (mostly light equipment and staff advice). Further, it is vastly more difficult to conduct successful guerrilla activities in a real totalitarian state than in a corrupt autocracy, as was Somoza's Nicaragua. The Contras so far have been limited to hit-and-run raids. To genuinely take and control substantial areas, they would require thorough and professional training programs, as well as air-dropped supplies and materiel in-country on the same massive and sustained scale as the Soviets, via Cuba and Nicaragua, are supplying their client rebels in El Salvador.

Whether the Contras succeed is right now anybody's guess. The FDN and Misura have become increasingly effective in the last few months, staging 77 separate in-country operations during March alone. They have established large arms and materiel caches inside Nicaragua, are becoming more tightly and professionally organized, and are gaining popularity with the peasants (for example, the FDN pays well—and in cash—for any food its troops require, a practice I witnessed several times). Consequently, just as things are going well for the rebels, FDN leaders now are deeply frustrated by the US Congress's threat to cut off aid to them following the recent revelations about CIA involvement in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors.

The official rationale for that aid is to enable the Contras to intercept Sandinista arms shipments to El Salvador's Marxist rebels. The Contras, however, are *not* fighting for the United States' national security and simply do not care about Sandinista arms shipments to Salvadoran rebels. "We are not customs agents," Adolfo Calero told me.

Rather, the Contras—at least those I was with—are fighting for the freedom of their own country, which means: political and economic freedoms of the press, speech, assembly, religion, and, most especially, the ballot. No FDN leader, even in unguarded moments, confessed to me a desire to take over the government. "Our goal," said Calero, "is to force the Sandinistas into holding free elections—the 'real McCoy,' as you say—something no Marxist government has ever voluntarily permitted." Freedom for the Contras also means an end to foreign domination—no more Soviets, Cubans, or East Germans in Nicaragua.

It was nearing dawn, and we were in northwest Nicaragua's Santa Clara valley, near the town of San Fernando. This was real Apache country—the place was crawling with Sandinista troops. Last night, friendly villagers had, at considerable risk, brought us some food, rice, and cooked plantains. Suddenly, a part of our patrol up ahead, led by a tough young kid named Kaliman, ran right into a detachment of Sandinista soldiers. The rockets, grenades, and machine-gun fire were landing much too close to me for everyone's comfort. It was Charley who grabbed my arm to lead me out of harm's way.

We cut through an abandoned coffee plantation and started heading back up into the hills. Most of the patrol would be staying inside—but Charley volunteered to lead the group that would guide me back across the border to Honduras.

For a solid nine hours we hiked through dense thickets of bamboo; across grassy hills studded with pine trees and mooing cows; past lush coffee, banana, and guava *fincas*; and then into the rain forest. I like jungles, because there is so much *life* in them, all wild and free. But now there was no time to relax, to absorb the sight of the towering vine-covered trees, the parades of leaf-cutting ants across the jungle floor, the brightly colored beetles, the flocks of parakeets, the myriad different-colored mushrooms and flowers glowing with a soft iridescence. I had to concentrate on plowing through ankle-deep mud, crossing over an endless number of streams and fallen logs, and not tripping on the ever-present roots along the trail.

I was not sure if I had ever been so exhausted or drenched with sweat in my life as I pulled into the Honduran camp. But I had kept up with Charley every step of the way. I collapsed into a hammock and fell asleep. In the meantime, Charley had something to eat and got himself rearmed and supplied. An hour and a half later, he woke me up to say goodbye—he was ready to leave, to walk back and rejoin his patrol.

I watched Charley as he marched down the hill from the camp and climbed up a nearby ridge. When he reached the crest, he stopped and looked back at me. It began to rain. My last sight of Charley was of him standing silhouetted on the ridge in the pouring rain, green bandana around his head, green sleeveless shirt, deltoids bulging, carrying an M-60 machine-gun with bandoliers of .308-caliber cartridges wrapped over his chest. He waved farewell, and I waved back. Charley raised his fist to the sky and yelled, "In Managua!" Then he turned and disappeared into the rain over the ridge, back to Nicaragua, back to the fight again.

*Jack Wheeler has a Ph.D. in philosophy. His first article in this "Fighting the Soviet Imperialists" series (on Angola's UNITA-guerrillas) appeared in the April issue. This article is a project of the Reason Foundation Investigative Journalism Fund.*

## The New Anticolonialism

It is perhaps not surprising that, in the struggle to throw off Western colonialism, so many of the Third World's "national liberation movements" have embraced the anticapitalist, anti-Western ideology of Marxist-Leninist socialism. And they often have had the backing—military, economic, and rhetorical—of the Soviet Union.

Today, however, this association is rapidly becoming a relic of the past. What is emerging might be called "the second stage" of post–World War II anticolonialism.

To investigate this new phenomenon of anti-Soviet liberation movements, I went to southwestern Asia, Africa, and Central America, going clandestinely into freedom fighters' territory. Each case was different, but I found a growing rejection of Soviet imperialism throughout the Third World.

There are wars of liberation in eight parts of the Soviet Empire right now—in Nicaragua, Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The emergence of these anti-Soviet armed insurgencies points to the end of Soviet expansionism and the start of its contraction. More and more of the Third World is realizing that Soviet Marxism is a one-way ticket to oppression and poverty. The Soviet Empire may, at last, be on the verge of breaking up.

—J.W.

*This article originally appeared in print under the headline "Fighting the Soviet Imperialists: The Contras in Nicaragua."*

Start your day with *Reason*. Get a daily brief of the most important stories and trends every weekday morning when you subscribe to *Reason Roundup*.

Email Address Subscribe

**NEXT: Further & More**

Jack Wheeler

MEDIA CONTACT & REPRINT REQUESTS

Show Comments (0)

© 2025 Reason Foundation | Accessibility | Privacy Policy | Terms Of Use

This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google **Privacy Policy** and **Terms of Service** apply.